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'If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing on public television – Joe Orton's plays on television'

Conference paper by James Martin Charlton,

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Westminster University at Alexandra Palace, 19-20 February 2015
Paper presented 20 February.**

"Anything that is worth doing is worth doing in public" is a line of dialogue from Joe Orton's 1967 screenplay for the Beatles, *Up Against It*. Had it been made, *Up Against It* may well have been the most public of Orton's works, reaching an international audience of millions. But it was never to be made and the largest public audience that Orton reached was via British television. Five of his plays being broadcast on ITV between 1966 and 1973, followed much later by a BBC production of his final stage play *What the Butler Saw* in 1987.

Were Orton's plays worth doing on public television?

The trajectory of his chronology shows Orton's ongoing attempts to do what he was doing "in public" - in increasingly *public* media. Unpublished novels; pseudonymous letters to the press; defaced library books left for the public to discover; radio broadcast; stage production; television production.

Orton chronology

- 1933 – John Kingsley Orton born on 1 January in Leicester, eldest child of William and Elsie Kingsley Orton.
- 1944 – John Orton fails 11+
- 1945-47 Attends Clark's College, a private commercial school
- 1949 – Joins Leicester amateur dramatics groups
- 1950 – Takes elocution lessons with one Madame Rothery
- 1951 – Studies at RADA; in June, John moves in with a fellow student, Kenneth Halliwell (8 years John's senior)
- 1953 – Begins writing an (unpublished and now lost) novel with Halliwell, *The Silver Bucket*.
- 1955 – Further unpublished, now lost collaborative novels, *The Mechanical Womb* and *The Last Days of Sodom*. (The latter attracted some interest from publishers but was ultimately rejected).
- 1956 – *The Boy Hairdresser* (collaborative verse novel, unpublished and lost)
- 1957 – Solo novel, *Between Us Girls* (published 2001)
- 1958 – Begins writing letters pseudonymously as Edna Welthorpe (Mrs)
- 1959 – Orton and Halliwell move into a flat in Noel Road, Islington; Orton writes solo play *Fred and Madge* (published 2001) and begin, collaboratively defacing public library books.
- 1960 – Collaborative novel *The Boy Hairdresser* (published 1999)
- 1961 – Solo novel *The Vision of Gombold Provost* (published 1971 as *Head to Toe*); solo play *The Visit* (published 2001)
- 1962 – Orton and Halliwell arrested and gaoled for stealing and defacing library books.
- 1963 – Orton writes radio play *The Boy Hairdresser*; sold to BBC and retitled *The Ruffian on the Stair*; writes stage play *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*.
- 1964 – *Sloane* produced at Arts Theatre and transfers into West End; *Ruffian* produced on BBC Radio Third Programme. Writes TV play *The Good and*

Faithful Servant.

- 1965 - Writes stage play *Loot*, which closes on tour; TV play *The Erpingham Camp*; Broadway production of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (flops)
- 1966 - Writes TV play *Funeral Games*; *Loot* revived at Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre and transfers into West End. Begins writing *Diaries* (published 1986). TV production of *The Erpingham Camp*.
- 1967 - Writes screenplay *Up Against It* for The Beatles; writes stage play *What the Butler Saw*. TV production of *The Good and Faithful Servant*. Stage versions of *The Ruffian on the Stair* and *The Erpingham Camp* produced as double bill *Crimes of Passion* at Royal Court. Murdered by Halliwell, who also takes his own life.
- 1968 - TV productions of *Funeral Games* and *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*. Broadway production of *Loot* (flops)
- 1969 - Stage premier of *What the Butler Saw* in the West End (flops).
- 1970 - Off-Broadway production of *What the Butler Saw* (success); films of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and *Loot*.
- 1973 - TV version of *The Ruffian on the Stair*.
- 1987 - TV version of *What the Butler Saw*.

What Orton was doing has come to be known as Ortonesque. The definition of this is slippery – we usually get something around “macabre black humour and social comment.” I’d suggest that what constitutes the Ortoneque – ultimately, Orton’s individual writer’s voice – is a series of recurring aspects within his work. This individual vision, these obsessively returned to images, this style, these themes which constitute the Ortonesque went from the privacy of unpublished manuscripts, to being sneaked into libraries and letters pages, to public theatre and finally to public television.

Watching the TV productions, I’m struck by how faithful they are to Orton verbally. They’re all heavily dialogic and there isn’t one in which his dazzling and very individual dialogue isn’t adhered to. All are cast with actors adept at handling the vocal requirements of the texts.

Orton’s first major success as a writer was *Entertaining Mr Sloane*. It moved from a small club theatre to the West End, and from there to Broadway. It received a number of excellent reviews but also became embroiled in an outcry over ‘dirty plays’. In it, Kath, a middle-aged woman, takes a young man, the orphaned Mr Sloane - in as a lodger. By the end of the play he’s killed her father and become the lover of Kath and her brother, Ed. Ed and Kath conspire to cover up the murder so that they can share Sloane as their sexual slave.

The television production of the play took four year to come to the small screen, with ITV cancelling and delaying the broadcast several times. Orton adapted the play for television himself – editing it to fit into a 90 minute slot and also bowdlerising some of the text. Even with Orton’s compromises within the text, the broadcast went out at 10:30pm.

The television version stays faithful to the one room setting of the play. The confined action is bookended with a short credits sequence which shows a pile of abandoned bike parts, accompanied by the sound of children playing. This subtly

situates the house in the municipal rubbish dump referred to as the house's location in the text.

The TV version is almost perfectly cast. Sheila Hancock's Kath is desperate, childish and predatory woman, revealed in occasional close-ups to be haunted by loneliness and despair; in adversity she gives as good as she gets, prefacing her seduction of and negotiations over Sloane with sly smiles. Edward Woodward's Ed is extremely striking, replete with messy Hitler-like hairdo, Big Bad Wolf jaw and beads of sweat playing on his brow and upper lip. Once he has Sloane installed as his chauffeur with extras, the hairdo has been elegantly coiffured. There were very few portraits of homosexual men in the 1960s which didn't show them to be either funny camp queens or victims or both; Woodward's Ed is hilarious in his panting, stuttering lust and his over-performed offence-taking, yet we don't laugh at Ed as a poof or pity him as a socially deserving case. Arthur Lovegrove is a suitably grotesque portrait of decaying age – all gaping maw and straining eyes – as Kemp. The production's setting in the midst of debris, gurning old man, verbal cruelty and the characters' desperate attempts to better themselves or escape the class-confined setting give the piece the feel of a particularly racy episode of the long-running sitcom *Steptoe and Son*.

The one weakness in the casting is Clive Francis as Sloane. Orton asked that Sloane be cast "very young... someone you'd like to fuck silly." Francis (an otherwise good actor) is pretty much bromide even when slouching around the house in leather trousers and cap. Orton's dialogue is preserved and played beautifully by all.

The TV *Sloane*, directed by Peter Moffatt and shot in Black and White using mostly mid-shots and two-shots, intimately or menacingly framing the characters in couples together, occasional close ups for moments of pain or panic, with now and again a camera movement - pulling back to reveal a character's reaction or closing in the bring us towards a nefarious act. The piece is violent – although most of the blows happen off-screen, Kemp gets a nasty kicking from Sloane, who later throws Kath roughly to the floor; Sloane receives his own good thumping from Ed. A very cruel section has Ed holds Kath's face to the camera playing a mirror, telling her exactly how awful she looks in what is surely one of most virulent stretches of misogynistic speech in 20th century drama. It's little wonder ITV got its cold feet and buried the play as late in the schedule as they could! With a few reservations, it is an excellent translation of the stage play to the screen.

In four years it took to bring *Sloane* to TV, Orton wrote three original teleplays. *The Good and Faithful Servant* was written first, in 1964, but didn't come to the screen until 1967. In a remarkable TV film directed by James Omerod, Donald Pleasance plays Buchanan, a long serving security guard who discovers that the retirement has few pleasures and whom dies a bitter man. The film opens with striking air shots of huge faceless factory, which could just as well be a prison or even concentration camp; the interiors cut between almost expressionist spaces within the factory and chintzy Coronation Street coziness interiors in sequences with the workers at home.

Critics have written about this play as Orton's most bitter and personal, also his most political. The decrepit Buchanan seems to have been based on his own father and the play is a strong howl of disgust against the Fordian job-for-life model. There is strange moment early in the film where Buchanan's uniform being wheeled away on a tailor's dummy, made even more strange by the dint of Buchanan himself whilst wearing it looking, due to his enormous teeth and stiff false arm, like a ventriloquist's dummy. Later, Buchanan chats drivel with another old man in the firm's retirement club as an old woman collapses, dies and is stretchered out in the background.

The young man, Buchanan's grandson, is less sexy and dangerous than others in Orton and is quickly subsumed into the social order without having committed any crime. Yet despite missing this aspect of the Ortonesque, the film shows that much of Orton's vision of society translates well in a piece that uses specifically screenwriting techniques of narrative to tell its story.

The two other plays, *The Erpingham Camp* and *Funeral Games*, are less filmic. *The Erpingham Camp* is a contemporary version of *The Bacchae* in which Erpingham as Pentheus is killed by a maddened group of Maenads, in this case holiday campers. Neither the pompous and sexually rigid Erpingham nor the easily maddened revolutionaries that oppose and finally kill him are appealing figures, a good illustration of Orton's generally dim vision of humanity. The production, again by James Ormerod, feels studio-bound - the visual aesthetic is reminiscent of Orson Welles' film of Kafka's *The Trial*. The play has a prophetic quality, as the fight between a kitsch middle-brow culture represented by Erpingham and the absurd, moronic games the holiday camp contestants play for "chief red-band" Riley mirrors popular television's own trajectory over the post-war years. The final funeral parade and encomium spoken over Erpingham's body was surely influenced by the television event of 1966, the state funeral of Winston Churchill, not the last time that Orton used the Great British wartime Prime Minister as a comic inspiration.

The action of *Funeral Games* cuts between two interior rooms, the study of an Evangelical fraud called Pringle and a dilapidated room in which a decrepit defrocked priest, McCorquodale ekes out his existence. The play pokes a great deal of fun at the hypocrisies of organized religion and social propriety. It recycles elements of Orton's 1966 stage hit *Loot* (human body parts are passed around for comic effect) and begins developing the satirizing of professional language that is a keynote of *What the Butler Saw*.

In these plays written directly for television, we see Orton recycling ideas from previous theatre plays and developing ideas for future theatre plays – the relationship between the two media was an interdependent one.

Orton's early radio play *The Ruffian on the Stair* came to television, in colour and in the version of the text revised for theatre production, in 1973 as part of ITV Sunday Night Theatre. Its major strength is its casting of the play's sinister and sexually ambiguous boy hairdresser, Wilson, played by actor, writer and

wannabe pop star Billy Hamon. Hamon is dressed in jeans with bulging crotch, leather jacket and quiff, looking very much like the Hamburg John Lennon. He enters carrying a transistor radio playing The Beatles' Love Me Do. This sheds a great deal of light on the play's story of a mysterious visitor whose presence and openly transgressive sexuality breaks open the central heterosexual couple's occulted world of veiled allusions to cottaging and prostitution, in the same way as The Beatles ushered in the sexual revolution. Another prophecy here - as Wilson's gunning down at the end of the play strangely pre-echoes Lennon's.

It was fourteen years until another Orton play came to British TV, when the BBC did *What the Butler Saw* as part of its Theatre Night strand, broadcast on BBC2. The production faithfully translates the text and single-setting of the play. For the most part, the direction is reminiscent of a BBC sitcom – Prunella Scales' presence makes clear a shared lineage between Orton's final play and *Fawlty Towers*. The increasingly fraught farce of the play seem forced when experienced not as part of a theatre audience collapsing in hilarity but in the living room, bereft of the laughter track a sitcom of the time would have provided as a help.

The production's most Ortonesque moments are directorial touches – at one point, a forlorn Prentice is captured sitting on a waste bin in long-shot whilst foregrounding a monkey ornament stroking its chin, exactly mirroring his pose. The descent of the policeman in leopard-skin dress through a baroque skylight, holding aloft an enormous phallus which has become detached from a statue of Winston Churchill is a beautifully surreal image, made more so by the policeman's Hitler-like hair and small moustache. At this moment, British Television offers us an image as surprising, daring and striking as those which Orton and Halliwell used in their defaced library books – Hitler waving Churchill's cock equals Gorilla in the Roses.

Taken together, these six Orton television productions offer a unique and useful insight into Orton and the world of the Ortoneque. Here is a major theatre writer using writing for TV as a sandpit to further explore or newly develop ideas that he uses in his stage work; here also is an ambitious earning a lucrative income stream from commissions and TV sales. The actor Kenneth Cranham told me that both Orton loved Peter Willes, who produced all of Orton's TV productions bar *Butler*, as he made so much money out them. They brought Orton's plays to their widest audience in his lifetime. They were eminently worth doing in public television.

There's a strange coda to this apparently happy Orton/Willes professional relationship. A few weeks before their deaths, Orton and Halliwell visited Willes' home for a party and Willes insulted Halliwell viciously when the latter wore an Etonian tie. Cranham believes that this incident had a very bad effect on the already parlous mental health of Halliwell, pushing him further towards the final act. A pompous authoritarian producer, a sexy working class playwright, aggression at a social event, pain and murder – all very Ortonesque and, in that the death made the front pages of the newspapers of the time and continues to be enacted in books, television documentaries, film and TV biopics and academic works, done very publicly.

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